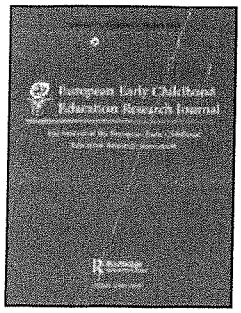

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New Developments

MAELIS KARLSSON LOHMANDER

Section Editor

Introduction

Usually in this section we present current developments with regards to research and policy in three different countries. This time we will only include one contribution that highlights key factors, which are important for achieving high quality early childhood education regardless of distinct or unique characteristics, associated with the ECEC system in particular countries.

Since the start of the OECD thematic review of Early Childhood and Care Policy in 1998, some 20 countries across the world have been involved in the project. Recently the OECD has had a very successful launch of the report from the second round - *Starting Strong II*. We feel privileged to have Dr. John Bennett's reflections on the key outcomes of the review project.

The next New Developments Section will appear in Volume 15, No 1, 2007. We invite you to make use of this space to inform others about current developments in your own country. If you have developments to report please contact maelis.karlsson-lohmander@ped.gu.se.

New Policy Conclusions from Starting Strong II An Update on the OECD Early Childhood Policy Reviews

JOHN BENNETT[1]

Part I – The OECD Thematic Reviews of Early Childhood Policy: The First Round

The *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* was launched by the OECD Education Committee[2] in March 1998. The impetus for the early childhood project came from the 1996 Education Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All* (OECD, 1996). In their communiqué, the education ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). From the perspective of the Education Committee, the rationale for the review was to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning. Not only was the provision of care and education for young children considered as necessary to ensure the access of women to the labour market but increasingly, early development was seen as the foundation stage of human learning and development. When sustained by effective fiscal, social and employment measures in support of parents and communities, early childhood programming would help to provide a fair start in life for all children, and contribute to educational equity and social integration.

At the 1998 meeting, twelve countries - Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United

States - volunteered to launch reviews of their ECEC policies and services. Between 1998 and 2000, OECD review teams conducted visits to the twelve participating countries.[3] The reviews of these countries, combined with careful consultation of the national ECEC policy co-ordinators in the participating countries, formed the basis of a comparative report published by the OECD Secretariat, entitled *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2001). The publication was released on 13-15 June 2001 at an international conference in Stockholm, hosted by the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science.

In order to enlarge the scope of the review, the OECD Education Committee authorised a second round of reviews in November 2001. Eight more countries joined this round: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Korea and Mexico. The second round of reviewing began in Autumn 2002 and ended in Winter 2004. In parallel, a series of four thematic workshops were organised by the Secretariat for the national ECEC co-ordinators on topics important for national policy making, viz. financing, curriculum and pedagogy, data needs, and early education for minority and low-income children. In sum, over the six year period, 1998-2004, some 20 countries have participated in country reviews, and 24 countries in the workshops organised on ECEC policy issues. These countries provide a diverse range of social, economic and political contexts, as well as varied policy approaches toward the education and care of young children.

The First Comparative Report

The first comparative report, *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001), identified eight key elements of successful ECEC policy that had emerged after examination of the ECEC policies and services of the first twelve countries reviewed. The key elements were:

A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation calls for a clear policy vision for children, from birth to eight, and co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels. A lead ministry that works in co-operation with other departments and sectors can foster coherent and participatory policy development to cater for the needs of diverse children and families. Strong links across services, professionals, and parents also promote coherence for children.

A strong and equal partnership with the education system supports a lifelong learning approach from birth, encourages smooth transitions for children, and recognises ECEC as an important part of the education process. Strong partnerships with the education system provide the opportunity to bring together the diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC and schools, focusing on the strengths of both approaches.

A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support: While access to ECEC is close to universal for children from age three in most European countries, more attention to policy (including parental leave) and provision for infants and toddlers is necessary. It is important to ensure equitable access, such that all children have equal opportunities to attend quality ECEC, regardless of family income, parental employment status, special educational needs or ethnic/language background.

Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure: While ECEC may be funded by a combination of sources, there is a need for substantial government investment to support a sustainable system of quality, accessible services. Governments need to develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating scarce resources, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and quality enhancement efforts.

A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance: Defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents, and children. There is a need for regulatory standards for all forms of provision supported by co-ordinated investment. Pedagogical frameworks focusing on children's holistic development across the age group can support quality practice.

Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision: Quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession. There is a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially viable.

Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection requires coherent procedures to collect and analyse data on the status of young children, ECEC provision, and the early childhood workforce. International efforts are necessary to identify and address the existing data gaps in the field and the immediate priorities for data collection and monitoring.

A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation: As part of a continuous improvement process, there needs to be sustained investment to support research on key policy goals. The research agenda also could be expanded to include disciplines and methods that are currently underrepresented. A range of strategies to disseminate research findings to diverse audiences should be explored.

Part II – The Second Round of Starting Strong Reviews

The research from the second round strongly endorses the eight elements as a framework for policy in the ECEC field. The new country reviews provide further evidence of the centrality of these elements in policy making, and offer new examples of specific policy initiatives adopted by countries in these areas. In the second round, several policy areas were explored more deeply: the governance of ECEC systems; the impact of financing approaches on quality; contrasting pedagogical approaches... As in the first report, the second evaluation report, *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006), also outlines some of the contextual factors influencing ECEC policy, in particular, the growing need to safeguard equality of opportunity for women when organising ECEC services and to conceive of these services as instruments of social equity and cohesion. The new *Starting Strong II* study proposes ten policy areas for consideration by governments:

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood

An understanding of the health, social and economic contexts is fundamental for policy-making in the early childhood field. ECEC programmes not only address the care, nurturing and education of young children but also contribute to the resolution of complex social issues. Social inclusion, family well-being, public health policies and gender equality can be served through intelligent, comprehensive policies. An integrated vision of early childhood services will promote parental leave entitlements, affordable quality services for children 0-3 years; improved wages and work conditions in the ECEC sector, support for parents and measures to promote the social inclusion of low-income and immigrant families.

Social equity: The reduction of child and family poverty is a necessary precondition for successful early childhood and public education systems. Early childhood services do much to alleviate the negative effects of disadvantage by educating young children and facilitating the access of families to basic services and social participation. However, a continuing high level of child and family poverty in a country undermines these efforts and greatly impedes the task of raising health and educational levels. Governments need to employ upstream fiscal, social and labour policies to reduce family poverty and give young children a fair start in life;

Family well-being and involvement: In proposing policy, governments will attend to the actual needs of contemporary families, e.g. to provide and organise services to allow parents the opportunity for full- and part-time employment, according to their wishes. Again, the provision of remunerated parental leave of about a year, followed by a child entitlement to a place in an early

childhood service, allows parents to be with their child in the critical first year, while, at the same time, supporting the family budget and facilitating the return of mothers to employment. Parental leave is a humane support to family life and bonding that advanced industrial economies may wish to consider. Research suggests that parental leave of at least nine months brings many benefits: lower infant mortality, more breast-feeding, less maternal depression, more use of preventive health care (Chatterji & Markowits, 2005; Tanaka, 2005). Unpaid leave does not seem to have the same protective effects (Tanaka, 2005). To link the end of parental leave to an entitled place in a publicly supported early childhood service seems to be a critical element in parental leave policy that adds considerably to the well-being and security of families and infants. Within early childhood services, family involvement should also be encouraged and valued, especially the involvement of low-income and immigrant parents, who face the added challenge of segregation and exclusion;

Equality of opportunity for women: The UN Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other equity agreements at international and national levels require that women should have equal opportunities *to* work and *in* work, in particular, with regard to formal work contracts, equal pay, the right to full-time work and equal promotion opportunities. Flexible work hours and the provision of early childhood services facilitate the reconciliation of work schedules and child-rearing responsibilities. In couple-based families, a more equitable division of child-rearing and household work facilitates women in taking on full-time employment.

2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies

Children's learning is a core goal of early childhood services, but within a context that ensures the child's socio-emotional development and well-being. In the past, services for under-3s have been seen as an adjunct to labour market policies, with infants and toddlers assigned to services with weak developmental agendas. In parallel, traditional early education services have placed children 3-6 years in pre-primary classes, characterised by high child:staff ratios, the employment of teachers without early childhood certification, poor learning environments, and the quasi-absence of care personnel. A challenge exists in many countries to focus more on the child, and to show greater understanding of the specific developmental processes and learning strategies of young children;

Two principles, selected from the country reviews, seem to support for the child's personal learning and well-being:

- A focus on the agency of the child, including respect for the child's natural learning strategies (Norway, Sweden);
- Listening, project work and documentation as major means of working with young children (Reggio Emilia):

These approaches counter the tendency of seeing the school as the benchmark and of imposing external targets and skills on young children. The first approach promotes the child's influence and shows confidence in the child's own learning strategies, that is, play, active learning, expression in media other than language, sustained shared learning from relationships with significant others, informal but intense research on matters of interest or concern to the child. In the second approach, 'listening to children' is also a sign of respect for the child's capacity to guide his or her own learning, when supported by well-trained educators within a rich learning environment. Project themes or specific topics, influenced by the surrounding environment, are determined by dialogue between children and teachers. "The main aim is that children should develop a desire and curiosity for learning, and confidence in their own learning, rather than achieving a pre-specified level of knowledge and proficiency" (Martin-Korpi, 2005). Underlying the approach is also the desire to introduce young children to democratic values and reflexes - learning to live together (adults and children) in a respectful, dialogic manner.

3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance

- The experience of the OECD reviews suggests that active governance of the ECEC system leads consistently to improvements in access and quality. To achieve effective steering, central ECEC policy units with critical mass need to be created, supported by legislation and financing powers. The growing importance given to such units can be seen in the United States, where, among others, Georgia (2004), Massachusetts (2005) and Washington State (2006) have brought together under one central agency the varied child care and early education services spread across these states. Active, integrated policy units can also be seen at work in the United Kingdom or in the large Nordic cities, which continuously improve their provision structures, adapting them to new needs and challenges;
- Decentralisation is necessary for effective governance, in particular in a field so localised and diverse as early childhood services. In the decentralisation process, it is important to ensure that early childhood services are part of a well-conceptualised state policy, which on the one hand, devolves real management powers and funding to local authorities and on the other, ensures a unified approach to regulation, staffing criteria, and quality assurance. In the interests of equivalent access and quality across a country, clear agreements need to be reached between central and local authorities about system aims, funding processes and programme standards;
- Support (sub)-systems and agencies are a necessary part of well-performing ECEC systems, for example, active policy units, a training and curriculum authority; independent monitoring and evaluation agencies; a research council, a corps of pedagogical advisors (coaches or inspectors); a monitoring and/or statistical unit, etc. Specialised support agencies undertake specific system tasks and maintain equivalent standards and accountability across large and diverse systems. Many such support structures are already present in education systems, but for lack of expertise, they may not to be fit for purpose in the early childhood field, e.g. inspection corps who lack pedagogical certification in early childhood, or data collection offices that are badly informed about the organisation and statistical needs of the early childhood field;
- There is a need in many countries to have a national research council or research association to organise early childhood research, and improve links between research, policy and practice. This need is felt most keenly in countries where early childhood university research is weak, for example, in countries where the training of educators remains at secondary level, or is confined to colleges of education, devoid of research funding or even a mandate for research. In many countries, the binary nature of tertiary education, which divides institutes into either research or vocational colleges, does not help early childhood research;
- For system accountability and quality development, programme evaluations are necessary. Such evaluations are common in the United States, and recently have been undertaken in Sweden (2004) and the United Kingdom (ongoing: 1997-2007). A national pedagogical framework for early childhood services that includes both agreed goals and a regulatory framework for the different programme types (family day care, centre-based care, integrated services etc.), facilitates programme evaluation. For many reasons, programme evaluation is more suitable in the early childhood field than the use of standardised tests or assessment scales within early childhood centres, which, in fact, is forbidden or discouraged by many early childhood authorities. Programme evaluations focus on structures (the quality of funding, staffing, programme standards, etc.), processes (both relational and pedagogical) and the achievement of curriculum goals. The centre of attention is on administrative accountability and on the (formative) assessment of the educators' work, rather than on testing young children.

4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular orientations for all ECEC services

- In the last decade, many countries have published national curricula for ECEC services, mostly for services dealing with children over 3-years: England in 1999, 2000, 2002 and 2006; Scotland 1999; France 2002, Ireland 2004; Germany 2004-5 (state-level only), Mexico 2005. In 2006, Korea publishes its 7th National Kindergarten for children 4-6 years, based on an original curriculum from 1969. Some countries have also developed a common curriculum or pedagogical framework for children 0-6 years: Denmark 2004, England 2006, Finland 2003, Norway 1996 and 2006, and Sweden 1998. Such curricula help to promote a more even level of quality across age groups and provision; to guide and support professional staff in their practice; to facilitate communication between staff and parents; and to ensure pedagogical continuity between ECEC and school;
- Many pedagogical frameworks are broader than a traditional curriculum, and may include a regulatory framework and an explicit values base. A guiding framework can define, for example, the legal status, pedagogical goals, pedagogical orientations and the regulatory framework (including programme standards) for early childhood services. When formulated in consultation with educators and other stakeholders, including parent associations, ownership and knowledge of the curriculum is deepened. An important aim is to identify the holistic goals a country wishes to set for its young children. Frameworks, based on consultation, allow local interpretation, identify general quality goals and indicate how they may be attained. They may also encourage the formulation of a more detailed curriculum or pedagogical plan by each centre. Box 10.1 provides an example from Finland, which, from 2000 to 2003, undertook a wide national consultation in order to develop a new ECEC curriculum:

Box 10.1 ECEC curriculum development in Finland 2000-2003

In 2000, STAKES established an expert Steering Committee to prepare a strategic framework draft for a new curriculum for ECEC services in Finland. This framework was based on the best research available and focussed on principles and process rather than on content areas. The opening document was intended as a stimulus for discussion with the various stakeholders, and in particular to institute dialogue with the municipalities, educators and parents. Local perspectives on the framework were collected, analysed and made available across the country on a dedicated web site. The process provided a country-wide platform around which comprehensive discussions about quality and how to achieve it were generated.

Subsequently, successive drafts of the strategic framework were published on the Web for discussion and critique. In parallel, municipalities were encouraged to train curriculum mentors and to begin dialogue with educators, parents and the elected officials.

At local level, staff and parents have the responsibility of elaborating each centre's more detailed curriculum and pedagogical plan, based on the national pedagogical framework and local municipality objectives. In addition, an individual development and learning plan is drawn up for each child in collaboration with the child's parents. Staff are given support by municipalities to implement the pedagogical plan and to assess their performance regularly.

Source: STAKES (Lindberg, P.), 2005

- The consultative curriculum framework will normally name goals to strive for in all areas of development. Readiness for school is important, but so also are objectives such as the health and well-being of young children, socio-emotional development, physical intelligence (motor development, rhythm, dance, music, spatial awareness, art, gestual and symbolic communication...), and shared values, such as democracy, knowledge of and respect for the environment, etc. For success-

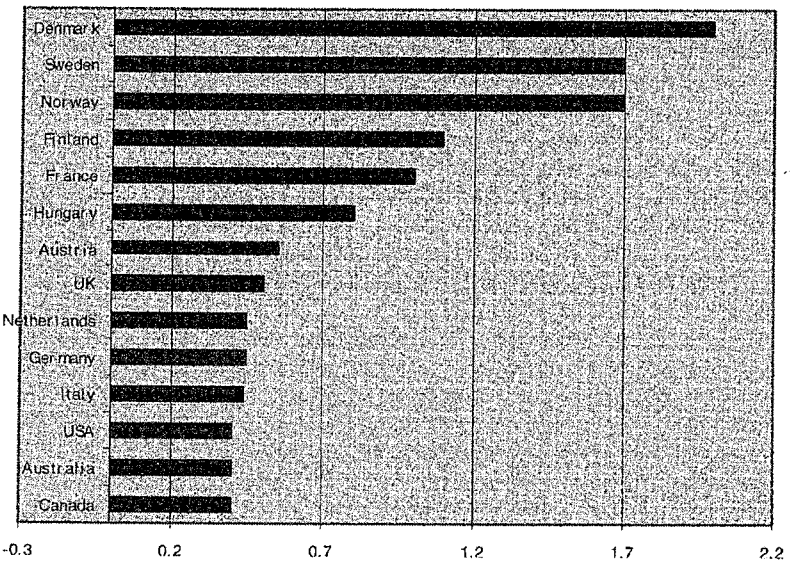
ful curriculum implementation, *contextual* (e.g. funding, regulation and support by the state, the morale of the centre and educators, etc,), *structural* (e.g. programme standards, stimulating learning environments, teacher certification, strong staff supports, professional development, etc.) and *process* variables (the relational and pedagogical skills of educators) are important.

- In several countries, curricular standards refer primarily to programme standards, that is, the structural and process standards required of high quality early childhood provision, such as educator or caregiver qualifications and child:staff ratios. More focussed learning standards are named by other countries, but many administrations prefer to see these as goals *to strive for* rather than requirements for young children. More research and socio-cultural sensitivity are needed in this field. What young children are expected to know and do influence strongly the nature of ECEC programming and consequently, the daily experience of young children in services. Consensus is lacking across countries concerning the critical skills, knowledge and pedagogical approaches that serve best the development of young children.
- At classroom level, comprehensive pedagogical skills are fundamental: well-trained educators will attend to the affective involvement of children and their cognitive engagement. They will also use a repertoire of modelling and instructional skills in handling issues of personal safety, health, social interaction (e.g. how to share, handle feelings, resolve conflict, etc.) and other knowledge, skills and attitudes considered important by a society for young children to acquire. The role of the educator is critical both in one-to-one interactions with the individual child, and in generating with children and parents learning projects that have a certain density and duration; that cover all areas of development; that motivate, lead to collaboration, and stretch the knowledge and understanding of each and every child. Educators will recognise also that young children develop along varied paths and at different rates of maturation. Although it is important to have high expectations for children, including what they can know and do, too great an insistence on standards can undermine the quality of pedagogical work, that is, the relationships and pedagogical activities that support positive outcomes for children.

5. To base public funding estimates for ECEC on achieving quality pedagogical goals

- *Starting Strong* noted that while ECEC may be funded by a combination of sources, substantial government investment is necessary to support a sustainable system of high quality, affordable services. In well-functioning systems, governments develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating resources, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and for ongoing quality initiatives. Without strong government investment and involvement, it is difficult to achieve quality pedagogical goals and broad system aims (social inclusion, child health and well-being, gender equality).
- In the area of funding, the results from the reviews are disappointing (see Figure 5.3 in Chapter 5 on *Public expenditure on ECEC across selected OECD countries* in *Starting Strong II*, OECD, 2006). As far as can be estimated, investments in services have increased only marginally in most OECD countries in the years from 1999 to 2004, with the exception of Korea, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States, where investments have primarily been directed to expanding early education programmes. Apart from the Nordic countries, Belgium, France and Hungary, few countries approach an ECEC investment level of 1% of GDP, as recommended by the former European Commission Network for Childcare. The reality is that investment per child in many OECD countries remains at a rate lower than or roughly equivalent to investments in primary school children, although younger children need more staff than older children, and generally spend eight to ten hours per day in the services they attend. Funding 'places' that cannot deliver pedagogical quality seems extraordinarily short-sighted. Other things being equal, investment per child in the pre-school years should be at least equivalent to investment per child in primary schooling;

Chart 16 Public expenditure on ECEC services (0-6 years) in selected OECD countries



Note: This chart is comprised of expenditure estimates, based on replies provided by country authorities to an OECD survey in 2004. The figures provided suggest that Denmark spends 2% of GDP on early childhood services for children aged 0-6 years, and Sweden 1.7%. These countries – and Finland - also allocate an additional 0.3% (approximately) to the pre-school class for children 6-7 years. The figures provided for France and Hungary are probably under-estimated, as in both countries local authority investments in infrastructure and supplies are not included. OECD, 2004. Likewise, the UK investment is likewise under-estimated as school begins at age 5 in the UK.

- Various strategies are used in the OECD countries to bring new financing into ECEC systems. Essentially, as in other social and education services, the ratio of qualified educators employed sets the level of ECEC costs. In many cases, countries limit these costs through allowing child: staff ratios in early education to rise (among the second round review countries, child:staff ratios are around 25:1 in France, Ireland, Korea, and Mexico). In the child care sector, costs are contained through the employment of poorly qualified and poorly paid staff - a feature found often in privatised child care in the liberal economies. Neither approach is adequate if the aim is to have services that provide high quality education and care for young children;
- A more positive approach to keeping costs at a reasonable level is to build up team teaching. In some of the Nordic countries, university trained, kindergarten educators form approximately a third (Finland) or half (Sweden) or 60% (in Denmark) of the ECEC staff in centres. They work in teams with trained children's nurses or child assistants. In this way, these countries can provide appropriate child:staff ratios and quality programmes. At the same time, staff knowledge and morale are maintained – especially for the lesser qualified staff - by acceptable work conditions and ongoing professional development tied to professional advancement;
- Another possible solution is the "quasi-market" approach, whereby private providers are brought into the provision network through public-private partnerships. This is the predominant approach, for example, in New Zealand. The approach may bring down the costs of services[4] and enlarge the choice of provision offered to parents. It can be acceptable also to ECEC workers, when the state supports a policy of higher qualifications and maintains a guaranteed wage structure for all qualified personnel, whatever their place of work. A similar situation pertains in the formal educa-

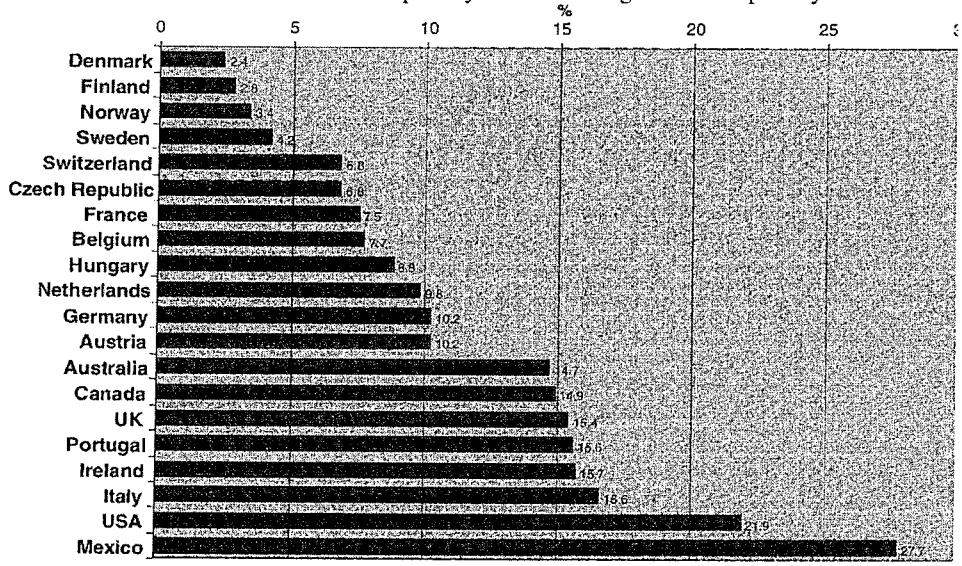
tion system, where 'government dependents' are contracted to deliver primary and secondary education. In many instances, for example in the Netherlands and Sweden, these providers receive full government funding, but are not allowed to charge fees or (in the case of Sweden) fees greater than those charged by the public services. This is to avoid a growing disparity between services for low- and modest-income families on the one hand and the services for parents who can afford supplementary fees on the other.

- A more radical means of lowering costs is for governments to encourage an open, deregulated market in child care services. Up to the moment, results from such policies have not been encouraging (Prentice, 2005; Mitchell, 2002; Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2004, 2005). A possible reason is that state disengagement and a loosening of regulations generally accompany the marketisation of services. In turn, weak government engagement leads to a fragmentation of provision, a decline in quality, and clear inequalities in access and outcomes. The crux of the matter is that when public funding of the child care system takes the form of subsidies paid directly to parents, the subsidies are generally too low to employ high quality staff or to finance system infrastructure. In addition, the steering capacity of governments vis-à-vis services becomes considerably weaker than in funding-to-services systems;

6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights

- A central aim in all countries is to improve the development and learning of young children, and not least, of children from disadvantaged and second language backgrounds. Early childhood programmes make an important contribution to this aim: they contribute to the development of young children and to their school-related achievement and behaviour (Brooks-Gunn, 2003, Thorpe et al, 2004, Takanishi, 2004). They are particularly important for children with diverse learning rights, whether these stem from physical, mental or sensory disabilities or from socio-economic disadvantage. The former group generally constitute about 5% of the child population, and the second group from 2.4% (Denmark) to over 20% (one child in five) in other countries.

Chart 19 Relative child poverty rates according to national poverty line



Source: *Child poverty in rich countries*, UNICEF 2005, (source years range from 1997-2001)